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## When Bias Hides in Plain Sight: A Reflection on Everyday Workplace Interactions



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In conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), workplaces often focus on policies, training, or representation. However, some of the most meaningful DEI challenges do not appear in formal decisions; rather, they show up in everyday interactions—small moments that reveal deeper patterns about who is respected, who is listened to, and whose time and expertise are valued.

Recently, a situation shared within our network illustrated just how quietly bias can operate. A highly accomplished senior professional—a highly educated woman of color with established expertise and proven leadership experience—requested support for a routine operational task. The task clearly fell within the responsibilities of a junior administrator/coordinator. Yet instead of being routed appropriately, she was asked by a white female colleague with no formal supervisory authority over either the senior professional or the junior administrator/coordinator to complete the task herself.

On the surface, this could be dismissed as busyness, oversight, or miscommunication. But upon reflection, an important question emerged: **Would the same request have been made if the senior professional were a white man with similar credentials and experience?** The senior professional raised this question directly and invited the colleague to reflect on it and examine if unconscious bias played a role. Instead of engaging with the prompt for self-examination, the colleague shifted the explanation to institutional resource constraints and used collective language—such as “our processes” and “our limitations”—to position the issue as systemic rather than personal. This response sidestepped the opportunity for genuine self-reflection and avoided considering whether bias, even unintentionally, may have influenced the interaction. Instead of taking responsibility for their behavior, the colleague reframed the issue as an institutional limitation, avoiding personal accountability, focusing on systems and workload, and further sidestepping reflection on the relational impact of the interaction.

This is where DEI work becomes subtle. Canadian scholars have long emphasized that inequity is often expressed not through dramatic acts of exclusion, but through everyday differences in how credibility, authority, and respect are distributed. Research consistently shows that racialized women in professional settings are more likely to be asked to “pick up” extra tasks, absorb administrative burdens, or demonstrate flexibility in ways that white colleagues—especially men—are not<sup>1</sup>.

What made this particular moment significant was not the task itself, but the misalignment between formal roles and lack of respect for a person who has achieved and accomplished their position. Organizational psychologists describe “identity-contingent labor”: the unspoken assumption that certain people will absorb extra tasks or be more flexible based on aspects of their identity. These patterns often unfold unconsciously.

Unconscious bias often reflects recurring patterns rather than deliberate intent<sup>2</sup>. Recognizing these patterns can be difficult, which is why feedback and concerns raised by colleagues are important signals for reflection and improvement. As a DEI scholar notes, raising a concern can be seen as a form of care, signaling a desire to improve<sup>3</sup>.

Situations like this highlight the need for reflection on our own behavior:

- Do I apply the same expectations and boundaries consistently across identities?
- Do I unconsciously rely more heavily on certain colleagues because they seem “easier” to ask?
- When someone raises a concern about bias, do I listen with openness—or slide into defensiveness or explanation?
- Am I taking responsibility for my actions—or hiding behind process?

Equity is not built only through large policies or initiatives; **it is built on the foundation of self-reflection and actions informed by self-awareness and management of biased behavior**. It is built interaction by interaction, in the choices we make with one another every day.

As we move into a new year, Winning Inclusive Solutions (WINS) Canada invites you to reflect on your own workplace moments—on how you were treated and how you treated others, and what resolutions arise from those reflections that can become action points for you in the new year. Inclusion grows when we expand our awareness, deepen our accountability, and choose respect in places where it has been historically unevenly offered.

### Foot Notes

<sup>1</sup> Research and writings by Canadian scholars such as Dr. Malinda Smith, Dr. Rinaldo Walcott, and Dr. Kisha Supernant have documented these patterns in professional and institutional contexts.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, M. S. (2017). The equity myth: Racialization and Indigeneity at Canadian universities. University of British Columbia Press.

<sup>3</sup> Ahmed, S. (2021). Complaint!. Duke University Press.

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